

James Madison to Thomas W. Gilmer, September 6, 1830. Transcription: The Writings of James Madison, ed. Gaillard Hunt. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1900-1910.

TO THOMAS W. GILMER. MAD. MSS.

Sepr. 6, 1830.

Dr Sir —I recd. by the last mail yours of Aug. 31. I concur with you entirely in the expediency of promoting as much as possible a sympathy between the incipient and the finishing establishments provided for public education; & in the particular expedient you suggest, of providing for a complete education at the public expence of youths of distinguished capacities, whose parents are too poor to defray the expence. Such a provision made a part of a Bill for the "Diffusion of knowledge," in the code prepared by Mr. Jefferson Mr. Wythe & Mr. Pendleton, between the years 1776, & 1779.¹ The bill proposed to carry the selected youths thro' the several gradations of schools, from the lowest to the highest, and it deserves consideration, whether, instead of an immediate transition from the primary schools to the University, it would not be better to substitute a preparatory course at some intermediate seminary, chosen with the approbation of the parents or Guardians. One of the recommendations of this benevolent provision in behalf of native genius is, as you observe, the nursery it would form for competent teachers in the primary schools. But it may

¹ See the bill in *Jefferson's Writings* (P. L. Ford, Federal Edition) ii., 414.

Library of Congress

be questionable whether a *compulsive* destination of them to that service would, in practice, answer expectation. The other prospects opened to their presumed talents & acquirements might make them reluctant, & therefore the less eligible agents.

As it is probable that the case of the primary schools will be among the objects taken up at the next session of the Legislature, I am glad to find you are turning your attention so particularly to it and that the aid of the Faculty is so attainable. A satisfactory plan for primary schools, is certainly a vital desideratum in our Republics, and is at the same time found to be a difficult one everywhere. It might be useful to consult as far as there may be opportunities, the different modifications presented in the laws of different States. The New England, N. York, & Pennsylvania examples, may possibly afford useful hints. There has lately I believe been a plan discussed, if not adopted by the Legislature of Maryland, where the situation is more analogous than that of the more Northern States, to the situation of Virga. The most serious difficulty in all the Southern States results from the character of their population and the want of density in the free part of it. This I take to be the main cause of the little success of the experiment now on foot with us. I hope that some improvements may be devised, that will render it less inadequate to its object; and I should be proud of sharing in the merit. But my age, the unsettled state of my health, my limited acquaintance with the local circumstances to be accommodated, and my inexperience of the principles dispositions and views which prevail in the Legislative Body, unfit me for the flattering co-operation you would assign me. The task, I am persuaded, will be left in hands much better in all those respects. . . .